

Office of Strategic Services versus Special Operations Executive

Competition for the Italian Resistance, 1943–1945

❖ Tommaso Piffer

Drawing on recently declassified records, this article explores the relationship between the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—the wartime intelligence agencies responsible for espionage, subversion, and other covert activities—in the Italian campaign during World War II.¹

Until recently, the extensive Anglo-American literature on OSS-SOE relations focused mainly on the two agencies' wartime activities in the Balkans and France. The Italian theater received relatively little attention.² The reasons for

1. The official history of SOE in Italy was published in David Stafford, *Mission Accomplished* (London: Bodley Head, 2011). In English, see also Christopher Woods, "SOE in Italy," in Mark Seaman, ed., *Special Operations Executive: A New Instrument of War* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 91–102; Charles Delzell, "The American OSS and the Italian Armed Resistance," in Renzo Amedeo, ed., *Le missioni alleate e le formazioni dei partigiani autonomi nella Resistenza piemontese* (Cuneo, Italy: L'Arciere, 1980), pp. 353–375; and Julie Le Gac, "From Suspicious Observation to Ambiguous Collaboration: The Allies and Italian Partisans, 1943–1944," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. XXXI, No. 5 (October 2008), pp. 721–742. The most important scholarly accounts in Italian are Elena Aga Rossi, "Alleati e resistenza in Italia," in Elena Aga Rossi, *L'Italia nella sconfitta: Politica interna e situazione internazionale durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1985), pp. 191–230; and Massimo de Leonardis, *La Gran Bretagna e la resistenza partigiana in Italia: 1943–1945* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1988). Recently published and based on the newly declassified OSS and SOE records are Mireno Berrettini, *La Gran Bretagna e l'antifascismo italiano: Diplomazia clandestina, intelligence, operazioni speciali* (Rome: Le Lettere, 2010); and Tommaso Piffer, *Gli Alleati e la Resistenza italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2010), which contains a complete bibliography. In 1990 and 1995, SOE and OSS veterans met in Bologna and Venice respectively. The proceedings have been published in FIAP—Special Forces Club, *No. 1 Special Force nella Resistenza italiana*, 2 vols. (Bologna: Clueb, 1990); and *Gli Americani e la guerra di liberazione in Italia: Office of Strategic Services (OSS) e la Resistenza italiana* (Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'Editoria, 1995).

2. On the Mediterranean theater, see esp. Jay Jakub, *Spies and Saboteurs: Anglo-American Collaboration and Rivalry in Human Intelligence Collection and Special Operations, 1940–45* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and M. R. D. Foot, "The OSS and SOE: An Equal Partnership?" in George Chalou, ed., *The Secret War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War II* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 2002), pp. 295–300. Other regional studies include, among the others,

this lack of attention are straightforward. First, the Italian campaign has usually been regarded as a “sideshow” in the history of the war. Second, OSS and SOE policies in Italy had fewer dramatic results than in Yugoslavia and Greece and thus rarely have drawn the attention of historians. Usually written under the shadow of the Cold War confrontation, the few studies that have tangentially dealt with this topic have tended to downplay the U.S.-British competition and have focused instead on defending the two agencies from the accusation that their policies toward the resistance were politically driven.³ Conversely, general histories of the Italian resistance movement, mostly by Italian scholars, have tended to emphasize a strong difference between a supposedly progressive U.S. policy and a conservative British outlook. These studies, however, have failed to assess how the two spy agencies’ relationship affected the actual support given to the partisans.⁴

This article shows that OSS and SOE operations in Italy went well beyond regional interests. A survey of these operations not only presents a noteworthy case study of the difficulties of wartime cooperation, but also sheds light on a key turning point in relations between the two agencies.

Italy was the venue in which the OSS was finally able to overcome its dependence on SOE and establish itself as an independent agency. Although SOE maintained its supremacy in the Balkans and OSS agreed to a good level of integration with its British counterpart in France, the situation was very different in Italy, where the OSS not only imposed the complete separation of the two agencies but also, by the end of the campaign, overtook the British in the number of missions and supplies sent to the partisan groups in the field. This reversal of the two agencies’ roles was a significant indicator of the “changing of the guard” in the clandestine world and had important implications for the effectiveness of the support given to the resistance movements as well as on the global activities of the OSS and SOE.

Roderick Bailey, “OSS-SOE Relations, Albania 1943–44,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. XV, No. 2 (2000), pp. 20–35; Tom C. Wales, “The ‘Massingham’ Mission and the Secret ‘Special Relationship’,” and Matthew Jones, ‘Kipling and all that’. American Perceptions of SOE and British Imperial Intrigue in the Balkans, 1943–1945,” both in Neville Wylie, ed., *The Politics and Strategy of Clandestine War: Special Operations Executive, 1940–1946* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 42–65 and pp. 90–108, respectively. Allied intelligence relations in the Pacific theater are analyzed in Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Services* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

3. See, for example, Frederick William Deakin, “Lo Special Operations Executive e la lotta partigiana,” in Francesca Ferratini Tosi, Gaetano Grassi, and Massimo Legnani, eds., *L’Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale e nella Resistenza* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988), pp. 93–107.

4. The standard account taking this approach is Pietro Secchia and Filippo Frassati, *La Resistenza e gli alleati* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962).

The Evolution of OSS-SOE Relations

OSS and SOE were created at different times but with the common task of supporting the anti-German guerrilla movements, which they hoped would spread in Nazi-occupied Europe. First to take shape was SOE, created by the British in the summer of 1940 shortly after the fall of France.⁵ OSS, which also included branches for political intelligence and propaganda operations, was set up two years later.⁶

The formal starting point of the relationship between SOE and OSS was an agreement signed in June 1942 that established geographic spheres of responsibility for each agency. SOE was granted responsibility for most of Europe, including the Balkans. In Germany and Italy the two organizations claimed the right to act independently. OSS took primary responsibility for China, the Pacific, and North Africa.⁷

The agreement reflected the strengths of the two organizations when it was signed. At that time, SOE already had two years of experience with the European resistance groups and had made contact with the most important of them from Poland to Greece, albeit with mixed results. SOE and the Foreign Office were deeply engaged in balancing the political and military problems posed by the existence of guerrilla groups, which often had postwar aims at odds with those of the British. By contrast, OSS was very much the newcomer. During the first few months of its existence, it relied heavily on the British for training, materials, and operational guidance. The primacy granted to SOE in the Balkans also reflected U.S. recognition that the area was traditionally linked with British interests, which at that moment the United States did not feel strong enough to challenge or even question. Conversely, the British were prepared to let OSS run almost all intelligence operations in preparation for the landing in North Africa, which was due to start in November 1942. At the root of that decision was friction between the French and the British in the

5. As a starting point on SOE, see William Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE* (London: St Ermin's Press, 2000); David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940–1945: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents* (London: Macmillan, 1980), and two recent collections of papers related to different theaters and interpretative problems: Wylie, ed., *The Politics and Strategy of Clandestine War*; and Seaman, ed., *Special Operations Executive*.

6. George Chalou, ed., *The Secrets War*; Bradley Smith, *The Shadow Warriors: OSS and the Origins of the CIA* (London: André Deutsch, 1983); Richard Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency*, 2nd ed. (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2005); and the two-volume official history: *War Report of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services)* (New York: Walker, 1976); and *The Overseas Targets: War Report of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services)* (New York: Walker, 1976).

7. Jakub, *Spies and Saboteurs*, pp. 49–53; Smith, *The Shadow Warriors*, pp. 168–176; and Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, pp. 391–393.

region and a British desire to assist the OSS director, William J. ("Wild Bill") Donovan, in establishing and proving his new agency.⁸

Paralleling the mutual distrust and suspicion that often characterized the Anglo-American alliance at every level, the relationship between OSS and SOE in the Mediterranean was never an easy one.⁹ The obvious Anglo-American rivalry resulted in British efforts to keep OSS under its control whenever possible, and in U.S. attempts to expand OSS's area of influence over its counterpart.

At the beginning of 1943, Donovan, anxious to build on OSS success in North Africa, began questioning SOE supremacy in the Balkans. The result, as Matthew Jones writes, was "an increasing determination to establish an independent OSS set-up and approach in the region sometimes at odds with official British policy toward the local forces of resistance."¹⁰ Donovan established an independent OSS base in Cairo and obtained the right to send OSS personnel to the Balkans. The first U.S. missions were dispatched in August. The British, however, maintained control over communications and codes. A few months later, when the British switched their support in Yugoslavia from General Draža Mihailović, commander of the Royalist Chetnik guerrillas, to Josip Broz Tito, head of the Communist partisan movement, Donovan and his men sought to alter that policy. The Balkans became the forum for the one of the strongest policy disagreements between OSS and SOE during the war. As Jay Jakub writes in his study of the OSS-SOE relationship in the Mediterranean, "the Yugoslav morass and British actions there and in Cairo during 1942–4 removed any vestige of naivety within OSS about the nature of special warfare and of the organization's relationship with the British."¹¹

Despite Donovan's intentions, the British preserved their leading role in the Balkans, both formally and de facto. A few months later, the opening of the Italian campaign provided the OSS with a new opportunity to try to overturn the balance of power with the British.

8. Tom C. Wales, "The 'Massingham' Mission and the Secret 'Special Relationship,'" p. 43.

9. The idea of a "special relationship" between the United States and Great Britain, as touted by Winston Churchill in his memoirs, has been challenged since the late 1970s. For a general and early overview of the problem, see David Reynolds, "Roosevelt, Churchill and the Wartime Anglo-American Alliance, 1939–1945: Towards a New Synthesis," in William Roger Louis and Hedley Bull, eds., *The "Special Relationship": Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (Oxford, UK: The Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 17–41, reprinted in David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt, and the International History of the 1940s* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 49–71.

10. Jones, "Kipling and All That," p. 91.

11. Jakub, *Spies and Saboteurs*, p. 143.

OSS and SOE in Italy

During the Italian campaign, the United States and Britain had extensive relations with the Italian partisan movement and provided the guerrillas with crucial support via OSS and SOE. The agencies trained the partisans, collected useful information, and relied on them when necessary to maintain order after the German occupation collapsed. The Allies shipped more than 6,000 tons of materiel to the Italian partisans during the war.¹² After an agreement was signed between the Supreme Allied Command in the Mediterranean Theater (SACMED) and the Italian Committee of National Liberation (CLNAI) in December 1944, the Allies made financial contributions that were of paramount importance to the survival of the Italian political body.¹³

Although OSS and SOE had contacts with the Italian antifascist movement before the start of the campaign, the two agencies did not become fully engaged in the theater until after the armistice and the occupation of northern Italy by the Germans.¹⁴

After September 1943, when the Allied armies advanced from southern Italy and the first guerrilla groups arose in northern Italy, both OSS and SOE established bases in the south. British special operations in Italy were concentrated under SOE base “Maryland” at Bari, with Royal Navy Lieutenant Commander Gerald Holdsworth in charge. The base was to be under the supervision of the 15th Army Group (later renamed the Allied Armies in Italy, AAI) and its political adviser Harold Macmillan. A regional section in London, directed by Lieutenant Colonel Cecil Roseberry, was responsible for liaising with the British representatives in Switzerland. SOE units that operated in Italy were called the No. 1 Special Force.¹⁵ As for OSS, all sections were nominally put under Company D of the 2677th Regiment (Prov.), based first in North Africa and later in Caserta.¹⁶

The first attempt to coordinate the work of the two agencies was made in February 1944, when Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ) created a special section (G-3 Special Operations) to “interpret and co-ordinate the policy and

12. “AFHQ History of Special Operation: Mediterranean Theater: 1942–1945,” Section XVI, Annex A, in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), HS 7/170.

13. On this agreement, see Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 255–258.

14. For an overview of SOE’s activity before 1943, see Roderick Bailey, *Target: Italy: The Secret War against Mussolini, 1940–1943* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

15. Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 76–70; Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, p. 547; and “SOE History of J Section,” in TNAUK, HS 7/58, p. 19.

16. *The Overseas Targets*, pp. 85–91.

requirements” of the two agencies and other organizations involved in supporting the guerrilla movement. U.S. Brigadier General Benjamin Caffey was appointed head of this organization. According to the “SOE History of SOM” compiled by the British, “the appointment of an American officer with no experience of secret work [was] due to the need to maintain an Anglo/American balance at AFHQ.”¹⁷ In April, AFHQ established a coordinating body for all Special Operations in the Mediterranean (SOM), with British Major General W. A. Stawell in charge, but OSS refused to assign any officers there because it regarded the new body as a backhanded British infringement on OSS’s independence.¹⁸

SOM’s position remained unclear. On the one hand, it fell under the direction of AFHQ only through the mediation of the G-3 (Army Special Operations section). On the other hand, it had no direct control over the lower echelons, “which looked for operational directives to various other commanders and were on the administrative side very well accustomed to look after themselves.”¹⁹ The result was quite confusing, and as the official history of SOE concludes: “it is to be hoped in the interest of posterity that no similar set-up will ever again recur, since it may be said with confidence that the set-up which existed in 1944 in the [Mediterranean Theater of Operations] involved problems of remote control which in any future war should be guarded against with every care.”²⁰

Proposals for a more efficient organization were frustrated by three factors: the strong anti-British feelings that were widespread in the OSS Italian section and the corresponding desire for independence; the peculiar balance of power

17. “SOE History of SOM,” in TNAUK, HS 7/61, p. 7. This attempt intersected with the overall reorganization of AFHQ, as agreed during the Cairo conference in December 1943. On that occasion, the Allies had agreed to unify AFHQ and GHQ Middle East under a single Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean (SACMED). U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who up to that point had been responsible for AFHQ, was put in charge of the landing in France, and British General Henry Maitland Wilson took his place. However, land operations in Italy were still to be conducted by AAI from a separate headquarters under General Harold Alexander’s command, as already established at the Casablanca conference. Matthew Jones, *Britain, the United States and the Mediterranean War, 1942–44* (London: MacMillan Press, 1996), pp. 97–137.

18. On this organization, see Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, p. 406; “SOE History of SOM”; and Jones, “Kipling and All That,” p. 93.

19. Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, p. 406.

20. “SOE History of SOM.” See also F. H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations*, Vol. 3, Part 1 (London: HMSO, 1984), p. 463. Both the No. 1 Special Force and the OSS units were under the control of HQ AAI, which was formally responsible for partisan warfare in Italy, but the former was directly dependent on London and SOM, whereas the latter was dependent on the 2677th Regiment (Prov.). In turn, SOM and the 2677th Regiment (Prov.) were part of AFHQ, but there was no direct link between them, and they formulated their policies independently. Moreover, no joint committee or coordinating body was created at AAI level.

inside the Mediterranean chain of command, which prevented AFHQ from imposing its will on the subordinate structures; and the commonly shared perception at the time that a strong, widespread resistance movement would likely never emerge in occupied Italy. In subsequent months the relationship between OSS and SOE in Italy was dictated mainly by the development of these factors.

The first factor relates to the general attitude of the U.S. teams, which were unwilling to cooperate with their counterparts while preparing for the invasion from their bases in North Africa and were growing increasingly intolerant of British patronage.²¹ In addition, most of the agents dispatched to Italy by OSS were Italian-Americans, fiercely Anglophobic, and deeply suspicious of British intentions in Italy.²²

U.S. suspicions, the search for independence, and a determination not to become entangled in alleged British maneuvers resulted in OSS's refusal to participate in all coordinating bodies proposed by SOE or AFHQ. U.S. officials refused to accept an arrangement between the two organizations resembling the one in North Africa or in the Balkans. Indeed, they refused any setup at all. Donovan directly backed this approach because he believed that in the Italian campaign "both organizations would be starting more or less from scratch" and OSS could prove its value as an independent organization.²³ This decision was the result of a clear calculation of forces. At the same time, Donovan pushed OSS to collaborate with SOE in France. For several reasons related to the difficult U.S. relationship with General Charles de Gaulle and the already strong network built in France by the British, OSS could not hope to act independently there, as Donovan was well aware. In France, this approach, coupled with the presence of U.S. officers more sympathetic to the British, resulted in the almost complete merger of the two organizations under the Special Forces Headquarters (SFHQ) in London, in one of the most successful cases of cooperation between the two agencies.²⁴

The second factor was the inability of AFHQ to impose its will on the lower echelon of commanders. This was a direct result of the presence of a

21. See Corvo to Brennan, 12 June 1943, in U.S. National Archives and Record Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 226, Entry 92 A, Box 19, Folder 280.

22. See, for example, the numerous passages devoted to the British in the diary of Max Corvo, a chief of the SI branch. Max Corvo, *The OSS in Italy, 1942–1945: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

23. Woods, "SOE in Italy," p. 100. The impact of Donovan's decision is also stressed in Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, p. 32.

24. See Jakub, *Spies and Saboteurs*, pp. 146–184; and Nelson MacPherson, *American Intelligence in War-Time London: The Story of OSS* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 70–91.

double tier of command (AFHQ and the AAI) and of hostility inside AFHQ not just between the two sides but among the different levels of commanders regardless of their nationality. Each section tended to look for guidance at the more sympathetic level of the chain of command: the British at the SOM, and U.S. officials at the G-3 section of the AAI, which consisted predominantly of U.S. citizens and seemed to be much less interested in facilitating coordination between the two agencies.²⁵ AFHQ's attempt to establish the SOM as a central agency proved unsuccessful, as did Wilson's attempt to establish direct control over the military activities of the AAI.

The third factor was that neither Britain nor the United States had expected a strong resistance movement to emerge in Italy because Italians had generally shown little inclination to engage in armed resistance. Months passed before the Allies could formulate a clear picture of the situation and decide whether the movement was worthy of support. In October 1943, summarizing a widespread view among British and U.S. officials, Cecil Roseberry stated, "we are doubtful of probable fighting value of these groups . . . We cannot afford to waste stores and aircraft effort on hypothetical bonuses."²⁶ Consequently, at that point the problem of organization and coordination was not considered a priority, and AFHQ did not want to push too far an already difficult situation.²⁷

However, even at the beginning of 1945, when the now much stronger Italian resistance movement was called on to play an important role in the last phase of the campaign, OSS refused to assent to any plan involving coordination with the British. In January 1945 the AFHQ proposed to create an integrated OSS/SO and SOE control headquarters, but because of intra-Allied friction the AFHQ attempt failed.²⁸ As Colonel Gerald King (G-3 chief of staff) stated, OSS considered any form of coordination an anathema

25. See also "SOE Activity in Italy," ch. 9, in TNAUK, HS 7/58.

26. Cipher telegram to Massingham, No. 818, 16 October 1943, in TNAUK, HS 6/781; and Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, p. 114.

27. The same was true concerning the procedures for allocating supplies. Doris Condit, *Allied Supplies for Italian Partisans during World War II* (Washington, DC: Operations Research Office, Johns Hopkins University, 1954), p. 10. Again, the comparison with what happened in London is instructive. The merger of SOE and OSS in the SFHQ was a direct result, among other things, of Eisenhower's intervention because he regarded the resistance as a fundamental part of his efforts. MacPherson, *American Intelligence in War-Time London*, p. 82.

28. "OSS/SO and SOE Activities in Support of Italian Resistance," 14 January 1945, in TNAUK, WO 204/11593. As happened at the beginning of 1944, on this occasion the coordination attempt was linked with a general reorganization of the commands. In December 1944, General Wilson moved to Washington to head the Joint Staff Mission, and Alexander was nominated SACMED for AFHQ. AAI was again renamed 15th Army Group, and Clark was put in charge of it. Jones, *Britain, the United States and the Mediterranean War*, pp. 211–215.

“both in word and fact” and tried to eschew it.²⁹ As early as December 1943, OSS officials had feared a British attempt “to switch [the] overall direction of partisan matters from AAI to AFHQ, i.e., from the American Clark to British Alexander,” and Donovan had immediately alerted General George C. Marshall about this possibility.³⁰

OSS formed a special committee to analyze the AFHQ proposal and ended up rejecting it on jurisdictional, administrative, and operational grounds. The committee noted that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had sought to maintain total independence of Secret Intelligence (SI) activities and that most Special Operations (OS) missions were also pursuing intelligence operations, making it impossible to merge them with the British.³¹ The committee also warned that integration would prevent the partisans from knowing “that they are receiving support and encouragement from the United States as a country.”³² Clark supported the OSS claims, as did U.S. Colonel John Riepe, who was in charge of Special Operations at 15th Army Group. Nothing further came of the proposal.³³ The British attempt to create at least a semblance of a Joint Planning Committee at the 15th Army Group level was also rejected because “when examined it revealed a well recognized pattern of integration with subsequent control.” “Although [the] entire incident appears minor—as the officer in charge of the 2677th Regiment commented—we believe it was [the] initial step leading toward subordination of our SO work with [the] probable hope that we would be involved in immediate post-combat political complications in [the] area of occupation. We consider results at present satisfactory.”³⁴

The lack of cooperation had negative consequences in at least two respects. First, collecting information was often difficult, especially in the months after the armistice when the situation in enemy-occupied Italy was far from clear. Because each agency managed a completely independent network of agents without coordination, it was impossible to crosscheck the information, a situation exacerbated by the lack of a clear chain of command.

29. “OSS/SO and SOE Activities in Support of Italian Partisans,” 2 February 1945, in TNAUK, WO 204/11593.

30. Suhling, Rome, to Glavin, No. 235, 12 January 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 181, Folder 1423; and “Memorandum for General George C. Marshall,” 15 December 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 354.

31. Copy of this directive in AFHQ 1238, USAFIME 979, 2 March 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 154, Box 59, Folder 978.

32. “Staff Study on Certain Phases of OSS Activities in Northern Italy,” 20 January 1945, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 91, Folder 41.

33. Glavin to Cheston, 6 March 1945, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 148, Box 112, Folder 1924.

34. *Ibid.*

The situation was particularly thorny in Switzerland, where the initial conflicting information was gathered by OSS and SOE. Although personal relationships were friendly, John McCaffery, the head of SOE's Italian section, eschewed any sharing of information with his U.S. colleague, the future CIA director Allen Dulles. In May 1944, after months of frustration, Dulles reported that "in dealing with the delicate Maquis situation, a satisfactory division of responsibility has never been decided upon between our organization and Zulu [McCaffery]," and then inquired what settlement had been reached in southern Italy, hoping to replicate it in Switzerland.³⁵ But because no settlement had been reached in Italy, Dulles's request went unanswered, and the situation became more tangled. McCaffery kept refusing to agree to a division of responsibilities, writing to his command that "since our work is solely resistance and principally Italy and since we have complete organization for work it seems to me that the duty of our American allies is to let us handle that sector at least at any point where there is double contact."³⁶ The stalemate was almost complete. When in July AFHQ complained about the lack of clear information, Dulles explained to Washington:

Frankly feel your cable fails take account realities North Italian situation and fact that partisan bands use every possible channel to signal their fields to [SOE] or us and that only you and [SOE] can determine at your end what action to take. Also my personal impression that until you and [SOE] can agree upon respective field of operation chaos will continue. Feel gravely concerned, view Italian yearning for American help, that this work seems to be more and more monopolized by [SOE] and from discouraging reports given me yesterday as to actual droppings on field signalled by us seems possible that [SOE] may be retained fields which they have not yet opportunity to activate. Also remember that until [SOE] here has some instructions about cooperating as to what we respectively send it is difficult to effect proper coordination here.³⁷

The problem of intelligence-gathering was not even partly resolved until the summer, when the Allies started receiving reports directly from the agents who had been dispatched to the partisans. In Switzerland the two organizations continued to work independently.³⁸

Second, the distribution of supplies immediately became a sore point between the two agencies, as each tried to secure the bigger share for itself.

35. From Bern, No. 319–21, 20 March 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 134, Box 166, Folder 1059.

36. Cipher telegram from Berne, No. 3483, 1 April 1944, in TNAUK, HS 6/782.

37. Telegram, 18 July 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190 C, Box 10, Folder 68.

38. On the OSS-SOE relations in Switzerland, see also Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 92–106.

The first serious clash erupted in the spring of 1944, when the AFHQ Special Operations Section, after considering the distribution of the missions already in the field, assigned two-thirds of the monthly supplies to SOE and one-third to OSS. The military chiefs also tried to set up British and U.S. areas of influence in Northern Italy, but OSS vigorously protested both directives. A U.S. officer noted that “any[thing] other than a 50/50 split with No.1 Special Force prejudices the American participation in this venture and prejudices the Allied cause by seeming to recognize a primarily British interest in the areas in question.”³⁹ Moreover, the division into areas of influence would have prevented OSS from sending agents into certain areas of northern Italy or forced them to withdraw some who were already in place. Accordingly, AFHQ decided that OSS and SOE would share equally in the monthly supply-drop allocation, but the question of how supplies were allocated remained a point of discord.⁴⁰

On the one hand, U.S. officials went out of their way to claim that the two allies were operating on completely equal footing and that any expectation of a senior partnership by the British was against the spirit of the alliance. This was particularly true during the first stages of the campaign when OSS still lagged its British counterpart in missions, supplies, and facilities. For example, when Donovan learned in June 1944 that McCaffery had told the Italians that the British were sending most of the supplies, he immediately wrote a strong letter to SOE Executive Chief Colin Gubbins:

If we undertake that kind of a campaign which seeks to show that one is delivering a greater amount of supplies than the other I don't know where we will end, because it involves the question of the Americans having furnished the greater percentage of the goods and also of the inability of OSS to obtain from your Air Force equitable allocation of tonnage. I wish that [SOE in Switzerland] could be made to see that it is advisable to avoid comparisons that it is good for neither side to invoke. . . . You and I went through that experience in the Balkans and I am sure you want no repetition of it any more than I do. We are making exactly the same monetary contribution to this Group as your people are.⁴¹

Gubbins responded that he “entirely [agrees] with [him] that nothing should interfere with [their] common interest in Italian affairs.”⁴²

39. “1st Endorsement from C.O. Italy to C.O. Med,” 3 June 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 101, Folder 202.

40. Smith, *OSS*, p. 91; and *The Overseas Targets*, p. 107.

41. Donovan to Gubbins, 23 August 1944, in TNAUK, HS 6/776.

42. Gubbins to Donovan, 2 September 1944, in TNAUK, HS 6/776.

On the other hand, OSS moved actively to eclipse and overtake SOE, aiming to let the Italians know that the United States was doing more than Britain to help them. This is where the weight of U.S. resources played a decisive role. As a U.S. officer wrote when discussing how to implement the drops:

We feel that this matter is not merely one of maintaining resistance groups on a basis to assist the armies from an actual combat standpoint, but what is even more important, it will mean a great deal from the U.S. standpoint in the economic and political field. Frankly, we view with a great deal of suspicion the attitude of the British toward the Partisan groups. Regardless of whether our economic and political aims are identical with the British or not, we will certainly not accomplish our aims by allowing the British to put us in disfavour in the eyes of the Italian population. We believe that if we can succeed in establishing contacts for supplies as outlined above we will go far in keeping U.S. prestige with the Partisans at least on fair level.⁴³

According to a memorandum from Roseberry in June 1944, the British were forced to accept the situation:

[The] Foreign office is not greatly concerned at increase of American prestige as their aims do not clash with those of H.M.G. and their activities very much tied up with home politics (the Italian vote could decide the presidential election.) We must not attempt a race with OSS either in finance or deliveries. In the former we would lose and we are only interested in supplying essential funds for essential purposes. With regard to supplies allocation of aircraft is made by commander in chief and we have so far received greater proportion.⁴⁴

Roseberry suggested telling the Italians that there was no rivalry between the British and OSS, that supporting the resistance was a joint undertaking, and that any attempt to play one off against the other was useless.

The Italian Resistance and OSS/SOE Coordination Problems

The military situation in northern Italy quickly changed in the summer of 1944, and the official history of the SOE avers that the Italian resistance

43. "Support of Partisan Activities," 27 October 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 92, Folder 47. The OSS's ability to provide a much bigger share of resources than the British could is stressed in Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, esp. pp. 34, 96–97.

44. Cipher telegram to Berne, No. 4892, 3 August 1944, in TNAUK, HS 6/776.

movement “flowered very quickly in what had seemed to be a barren land.”⁴⁵ After difficult months of organization, the bands that had survived the first strong attacks by the Germans started engaging the enemy and spread particularly in Piedmont, behind the Apennine front and on the eastern border. On 20 July 1944, General Caffey asserted that “the resistance groups in Italy have done quite a bit of demolition and have exceeded his [Caffey’s] expectations in this matter.” The general added that he had doubted “their usefulness and had been agreeably surprised.”⁴⁶ OSS and SOE then began sending agents and supplies on a regular basis.

In this new situation, the liaison structure set in the spring of 1944 between the two organizations proved to be dramatically inadequate. In the field, the lack of coordination resulted in different missions working side by side with different directives and agendas. Because of OSS’s attempt to gain its independence and AFHQ’s inability to integrate the two agencies, the coordination of missions was limited to exchanging information on the status of Special Operation missions, and even this did not occur until the final months of the war. Joint missions were refused by OSS, not only because they would not have permitted the United States to pursue its own policy but also because OSS had another consideration in mind: its agents were mostly Italians recruited on the spot, and they would most likely be subordinate to British officers in any joint missions.⁴⁷ An official history of the campaign compiled by SOE indicates that OSS “preferred rather to leave an area in which a British Mission was working rather than to come to an agreement with it for a division of responsibilities.”⁴⁸

As a result, it happened frequently that a mission would reach the field only to find that another mission was already working in the area.⁴⁹ “To anyone with experience of field conditions,” commented Lieutenant Colonel McMullen, the SOE chief of mission in the Liguria region, “this spelt the most dire confusion.”⁵⁰ Not until the final months of the war did the two agencies put the agents they dispatched to the same area in contact with one another.⁵¹

45. Mackenzie, *The Secret History of SOE*, p. 546.

46. “Special Operations Meeting,” 20 June 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 88, Folder 5.

47. “Company D Semi Monthly Report, October 1–15, 1944,” 20 October 1944, p. 8, in NARA RG 226, Entry 99, Box 27; and “Company D Semi-Monthly Report, November 16–30, 1944,” 5 December 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 99, Box 29, Folder 2.

48. “SOE Activity in Italy,” ch. XII.

49. See, for example, the report by OSS mission Guinness in NARA, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 236.

50. “Report by Lt. Col. R. P. McMullen, D.S.O., M.B.E., Commander of Allied Liaison Mission Liguria and Western Emilia,” 23 May 1945, p. 15, in TNAUK, HS 6/843.

51. “SOE Activity in Italy,” ch. XII.

When that did not happen, all conflicts and problems had to be sorted out by the agents in the field.

The lack of coordination was sometimes risky for the agents. In March 1945, an OSS detachment sent three German deserters and partisans over the lines to report on the front without warning the SOE mission operating in the area. The three were immediately arrested as enemy spies and were nearly shot.⁵²

Acute problems also arose when British and U.S. agents pursued different or opposite policies with the insurgents. These problems deepened the divisions within the resistance movement and seriously eroded their military efficiency. OSS tended to send agents to the strongest formations rather than to unified commands of several groups. By contrast, SOE assigned agents to a unified command “with the object of strengthening it and supporting it in its task of coordination.”⁵³ Furthermore, the missions often produced different evaluations of the groups’ strength and supported rival groups, with predictable results.

The conflicting management procedures of Italian personnel sent to the field with the Allied missions were also a source of friction and misunderstanding. Unlike the British, OSS lacked trained personnel and had to recruit mostly Italian agents. Conforming to the general U.S. approach to political issues, OSS tended not to consider the political affiliation of the agents, provided that they obeyed orders.

Consequently, whereas an Italian agent enrolled by OSS recalled that he had “always turned to the Communist Party and my comrades for support,” another, stationed in the same area and enrolled by the same agency, stated that “he was a ‘super-monarchist’ and would do everything in his power to secure the continuation of the house of Savoy in Italy.”⁵⁴ Typically, the information sent by these agents reflected party propaganda. Sometimes Italian agents conducted explicit anti-British propaganda. An SOE agent recounted: “Cesare [an Italian agent] did nothing but divide the Partisans and the population in two sides, pro-English or pro-American, never just pro-Allies.”⁵⁵ When the British protested the use of agents affiliated with the Communist Party, OSS accused them of conducting a politically slanted policy and refused to withdraw

52. Major Davies to Major Macintosh, 19 March 1945, in TNAUK, HS 6/844.

53. “SOE Activity in Italy,” ch. XII.

54. “Napoli-Tigers,” in NARA, RG 226, Entry 210, Box 237; and “Report by Capt J. P. S. Amore,” in TNAUK, HS 6/840.

55. “Report on Activities of Detachment with IV Corps by Capt. C. A. W. Leng 2 April 45–30 April 45,” in TNAUK, HS 6/868.

the agents.⁵⁶ For the British, the situation became increasingly frustrating: “The present divergence of policies between OSS and ourselves,” wrote John Stevens, chief of the SOE mission in Piedmont, “is very disheartening, as it is increasing an already difficult task of establishing order out of Partisan chaos. It would be better if there were an American Officer in Piedmont controlling their missions, but all OSS personnel appear to be Italian. It is exceedingly irritating that equal weight is apparently given to Italians, all of whom are party-bound, and to British personnel.”⁵⁷

The competition over supply drops hindered cooperation even more, especially after U.S. officials succeeded in obtaining their own packing stations and airfields to bypass the British channel.⁵⁸ Thus, by the end of 1944 and thereafter, OSS could ship large quantities of materiel, with no regard for either SOE policy or the efficacy of transferring so many weapons to the partisans. From December 1944 on, as Max Corvo predicted, OSS “would have overtaken the SOE in all activities in Northern Italy” and British predominance would have been ended “by the facts.”⁵⁹ In February 1945, AFHQ decided on a general reduction of military supplies for partisans in certain areas.⁶⁰ The new policy was dictated by a fear of overarming the partisans, which created a dangerous situation toward the end of the war. This directive is what prompted AFHQ to ask for better cooperation so that the two organizations could pursue the same policy. But the 15th Army Group fought the directive, and OSS and SOE also asked that it be reconsidered. While waiting for a new decision, OSS kept sending supplies despite the limits imposed. Aware that this action directly contradicted the directives, the agency proceeded cautiously but forged ahead anyway.⁶¹ The OSS Official War Report affirms:

In the spring of 1945, OSS had more clandestine radio circuits successfully in operation and active liaisons with a greater number of effective resistance groups than did its British intelligence and operations counterparts. In the last two months of air supply, the OSS allotment was set higher than for the British, and by VE-Day the total of American supplies, handled by the OSS packing

56. “Communist Agents,” 10 November 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 128, Folder 681; and “Franco, CGS, Osoppo-Garibaldi Division,” 9 December 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 92, Folder 53.

57. Senior BLO, Piedmont (Stevens) to Commander SOM, 22 March 1945, in TNAUK, HS 6/856.

58. Condit, *Allied Supplies for Italian Partisans*, p. 13.

59. See Raimondo Craveri, *La campagna d'Italia e i servizi segreti: La storia dell'ORI: 1943–1945* (Milan: La Pietra, 1980), pp. 158–159.

60. Allied Force Headquarters, “Support of Italian Resistance in N. ITALY,” 4 February 1945, in NARA, RG 84, Office of the U.S. Political Advisor, Box 91, Folder “820.02 Ital—Resistance.”

61. See Suhling and Smith from Newhouse and Kroman, 26 March 1945, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 154, Box 59, Folder 977.

station and successfully delivered inside Northern Italy, appreciably exceeded corresponding SOE total.⁶²

In March 1945, Major Gordon Lett, an SOE officer working with partisans in the La Spezia region, reported that the already difficult situation with the partisans “has been badly aggravated by the dropping of large quantities of arms and equipment in the area to the OSS mission, which it was quite impossible . . . for the British mission to control.”⁶³ Similar reports came in from all across the front. Another agent from the same area, noting the anti-British sentiment among the partisans, wrote that “the root cause of this was undoubtedly the arrival of the vastly superior quantity and quality of American supplies, compared with the meager trickle that reached the patriots through the British Mission.”⁶⁴

The partisans generally interpreted this discrepancy in political terms, blaming the British for attempting to prevent the expansion of the Italian resistance movement. As a British agent reported, “to outward appearances we were playing to perfection the part of the perfidious Albion.”⁶⁵ Another agent, this time from Piedmont, reported: “As far as supplies go, the general feeling was that the Americans had done more, partly because [they were] richer but also because [they were] more sympathetic. In some quarters, the view was that they probably would have done better still if it had not been for the British.”⁶⁶ Italian historians, especially those writing before the first British and U.S. records became available, have generally supported this vision, playing up the supposed difference between a progressive U.S. policy and a conservative British one.

The competition between the two agencies also played a role in the relationship with the CLNAI. In this case, OSS was trying to gain a foothold in a group that until then had been managed by the British. Both Dulles and McCaffery had communicated to their respective superiors that the CLNAI preferred to work with them, an indication that the Italians were playing one agency against the other to maximize support.⁶⁷ Certainly, U.S. officials were

62. *The Overseas Targets*, p. 108.

63. Headquarters, No. 1 Special Force, “Report on the ‘Blundell Violet’ Mission by Major Lett,” 5 April 1945, in TNAUK, HS 6/830.

64. “Report on Operation Blundell Violet,” in TNAUK, HS 6/830.

65. “Mission to Eastern Tirol and SW Carinthia, 18 August–27 November 1944 by Major GRH Fielding 3 K.O.H.,” in TNAUK, HS 6/850.

66. “Report by Capt. M. Terry,” in TNAUK, HS 6/840.

67. Cipher Telegram to Massingham, 3 December 1943, in TNAUK, HS 6/781; Bern to OSS, 17 July 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 134, Box 166, Folder 1064; and John McCaffery, “No Pipes or Drums,” in Imperial War Museum (IWM), GB62, (J McCaffery), 05/77/1, p. 81.

the first to provide them with significant financial support. The British were then forced to allocate a similar amount, even if they would have preferred to involve the Italian government in the matter. The London headquarters instructed McCaffery to give the money and to “avoid every reference to apparent competition with OSS [and] merely stress that the needs of CLNAI are desperate.”⁶⁸

In July 1944, SOE supported an operation in northern Italy led by Italian General Raffaele Cadorna, who was supposed to be appointed the military commander of the CLNAI. Max Corvo, a senior official in the OSS SI branch, wrote that “by sending to northern Italy a general who is very popular with the democratic forces, SOE hopes to obtain complete control of the northern Italian situation.”⁶⁹ As a countermeasure, a mission led by a U.S. officer was organized and sent to establish contact with the CLNAI. A similar situation occurred a few months later when SOE organized a trip to southern Italy by four CLNAI delegates to discuss an agreement with AFHQ. OSS officials thought that “SOE has been negotiating with CLN to the exclusion of our interest and investment both in personnel and finance,” and they asked to participate in all meetings with the delegates.⁷⁰ Vincent Scamporino, one of the SI branch chiefs, welcomed them with a salute to compatriots: “I know that the British do a lot for you, but from us Americans you will have all what they gave you and always something more; and that’s because we Italian-Americans have your blood in our veins.”⁷¹ Yet the U.S. maneuvers were unsuccessful. With the 1944 agreement between the Italians and the Allies, the British achieved the most significant landmarks in their relationship with the CLNAI.⁷²

Conclusion

The relatively simple political situation in which the Allies were operating in Italy was the only thing that prevented the unsatisfactory arrangements established by OSS and SOE from causing greater problems. In the Balkans

68. “CLNAI Finance,” 29 July 1944, in NA HS 6/788.

69. “Plans and Objectives for OSS Liaison to the North Italian Patriot Command,” in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 181, Folder 1424.

70. Glavin from Newhouse No. 184, 25 October 1944, in NARA, RG 226, Entry 190, Box 181, Folder 1423.

71. See Alfredo Pizzoni, *Alla guida del CLNAI: Memorie per i figli* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), p. 115.

72. Stafford, *Mission Accomplished*, pp. 255–258.

the British had maintained the lead in special operations. When civil war broke out in Yugoslavia, they were able to impose their policy of supporting Tito's Communist groups. OSS's attempt to reverse this approach failed. Even though U.S. officials bitterly criticized the British stance toward Yugoslavia during and after the war, SOE was able to continue pursuing it until May 1945.

No serious clashes occurred between the different groups in Italy, and the Allies did not need to make difficult choices about which groups to support. Both OSS and SOE agreed that all anti-Nazi partisans should be supported and that they would not be at risk of a confrontation with the legitimate government. Even though on several occasions British and U.S. agents in the field adopted different policies or supported rival groups, this did not directly affect the political setup of the Italian resistance movements.

Nevertheless, the competition between OSS and SOE in Italy took a heavy toll on military effectiveness. The agents went to the field without any coordination, causing misunderstandings and an overlapping of missions. Sometimes missions or supply drops were dispatched by OSS without regard for their military effectiveness and with the sole aim of gaining an edge on SOE. The extensive use by OSS of Italian agents with strong political affiliations had a negative impact on support to the Italian resistance and on OSS's relationship with the British. The competition diminished the Allies' standing in the eyes of the partisans and contributed to anti-Allied feelings that intensified in postwar Italy.

Whatever the problems, the Italian campaign put an end to the British attempt to maintain the U.S. agency at a subordinate level. OSS not only managed to operate completely independently but also eventually overtook the British in missions and supplies sent to the field. This development was paralleled in the growing preponderance of the United States in the Anglo-American alliance, which led in turn to a shift of strategy with the opening of a second front in France and the end of Churchill's Mediterranean focus. For better or for worse, a new era in intelligence history had begun.